
Government of the District of Columbia



Metropolitan Police Department

Testimony of
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***Public Roundtable on
Bill 16-894
Use of Closed Circuit Television to Combat
Crime Amendment Act of 2006***

Committee on the Judiciary
Phil Mendelson, Chair
Council of the District of Columbia

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John A. Wilson Building
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Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, staff and guests ... once again, I thank you for the opportunity to present this statement concerning the Metropolitan Police Department's use of Closed Circuit Television, or CCTV, to help combat neighborhood crime. As you know, CCTV was one of the topics I covered in my testimony at last Friday's hearing on the crime emergency. My testimony today will amplify some key points of my earlier statement.

Since the Council passed the Enhanced Crime Prevention and Abatement Emergency Amendment Act of 2006 in July, our Department has worked at break-neck speed to get CCTV cameras up and running in our neighborhoods. And we worked so hard and so quickly to get the cameras operational for two primary reasons: first, to take advantage of the cameras' crime-fighting benefits in targeted locations during the current emergency; and second, to give us as long a time period as possible to evaluate the effectiveness of the cameras in combating neighborhood crime.

To date, we have installed a total of 48 cameras, spanning all seven police districts in the city. In selecting these sites, our Department followed the direction provided by the Council. We considered calls for police service, reported crimes and other public safety indicators, as well as recommendations or requests from Advisory Neighborhood Commissions and civic or citizen associations. We also considered public housing developments in our identified "Hot Spot" areas.

Based on these criteria and their knowledge of their districts, our district commanders developed a prioritized list of locations within their districts for locating cameras. Prior to installing any camera, the district commander consulted with both the Ward Councilmember and the Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner representing the specific location where the camera would be situated.

As I did last Friday, I want to publicly acknowledge and thank the District Department of Transportation for their tremendous work and cooperation in helping us get these cameras up and running in such a short period of time. Installing a CCTV camera is not like plugging in a DVD player or some other type of household appliance. Locations had to be surveyed; in some cases, new poles had to be erected; trees often times needed to be trimmed; electrical power to the camera had to be secured; and, under our CCTV regulations, signs had to be printed and placed in the area alerting the public to the presence of the camera. Responsibility for most of these tasks fell on DDOT, and they performed with amazing skill, precision and speed. I want to publicly salute their efforts, as well as the excellent work of the MPD's Information Technology and Synchronized Operations Command units.

The 48 cameras were installed in groups between early August and mid-September. The cameras focus on public space only and are "passively monitored" by the MPD. "Passive monitoring" means that officers do not watch the camera feeds in real time. Rather, camera images are recorded and then reviewed at a later time if there are reports of criminal activity in the area. As has been reported in the media, there have been a handful of cases in which detectives have reviewed video from the cameras. But to date, the cameras have yet to produce useful evidence in an investigation.

Keep in mind, however, that CCTV is not simply about solving crimes that have already occurred. Clearly, the best outcome would be to prevent and reduce crime—in the areas with the cameras and throughout the city. As you heard from the Baltimore Police representative last Friday, experience from other cities suggests that CCTV cameras can have an impact on preventing crime and

enhancing the public's feelings of safety in neighborhoods that have cameras, eventually transforming neighborhoods with entrenched crime problems. We are currently analyzing both of these factors: crime prevention and public perceptions. Our results thus far are preliminary, but they are encouraging.

Based on our analysis of just those locations where cameras were installed during August, violent crime has decreased by 73 percent when compared to the same period of 2005. Property crime decreased by 57 percent, producing an overall 64 percent reduction in crime. Our analysis was limited to the specific "viewsheds" of those particular cameras. We plan to expand this analysis to include more cameras, a longer time frame and any displacement effect the cameras may have on locations near the cameras. I know displacement of crime is an issue that many Councilmembers are concerned about, and I will address that issue in just a moment.

In addition to analyzing preliminary crime data, our Department also conducted a brief survey of the Advisory Neighborhood Commissioners representing those locations with cameras installed during August. We contacted 21 Commissioners, and 14 responded. As a group, their response to the cameras has been overwhelmingly positive. Seventy-one percent stated they felt "a lot safer" with a camera in their single member district, and 21 percent said they felt "a little safer." Similarly, 79 percent "strongly agreed" with the statement that CCTV cameras will help prevent crime in the District of Columbia, and 14 percent "somewhat agreed." All but one of the Commissioners stated that they had heard positive feedback from the community about the cameras, and 77 percent reported "very positive" feedback.

As I mentioned last Friday, these perceptions of neighborhood safety are important because individual perceptions ultimately affect behavior. People who feel safe in their neighborhoods are more likely to get out and walk, shop, dine out, go to recreation facilities and take advantage of other opportunities in their communities. And when more law-abiding residents are out in our neighborhoods, criminal activity tends to diminish.

CCTV cameras have not totally eliminated crime from the locations where cameras have been installed. But it is important to remember that the locations with cameras are, after all, areas with significant crime problems to begin with. So it should not be unexpected that there would be criminal activity there. But it appears that crime has been reduced – and reduced significantly – and the residents feel safer as a result.

I do want to address very quickly two issues that came up at Friday's hearing. The first involves the need to regulate the use of CCTV to ensure the integrity of any such program. This need was articulated quite well by the representative of the Constitution Project. As you know, our Department for a number of years has used CCTV to assist during major events and periods of heightened alert for terrorism in the downtown area. To ensure the effective and ethical use of CCTV and to guard against any abuse of the system, the Metropolitan Police Department developed a comprehensive General Order that establishes strict policies and procedures on the use of CCTV. In November 2002, the DC Council also approved regulations on the MPDC's use of CCTV. We are abiding by these same strict regulations and guidelines in our use of CCTV in neighborhood settings. I am providing for the record the Department's directive governing the deployment and use of the cameras.

As such, it is my opinion that the District's CCTV system is easily one of the most closely regulated and scrutinized systems of its kind in the nation. It meets the criminal justice video surveillance guidelines adopted by the American Bar Association, and I believe it also meets – or even exceeds – the guidelines presented by the Constitution Project. We take this issue very seriously, and as long as I am chief of police, we will be ever-vigilant in ensuring the absolute integrity of our system.

The second issue is the “displacement” of crime – or the possibility that as we put cameras in one particular location, the criminal activity we were targeting simply moves somewhere else. Like members of this Committee, we are anticipating that crime may shift in reaction to CCTV camera placement, and we are preparing for that possibility.

Each Police Service Area, or PSA, in which a camera is located will have an active PSA Plan detailing specific steps to address possible displacement of crime around the CCTV locations. Of course, our PSA members and crime analysis staff will be monitoring very closely the crime levels in and around our cameras locations so that we can detect and react to any changes or trends in crime as quickly as possible. These advance plans will help the Department prevent entrenched crime problems from simply relocating to other, nearby areas, or to quickly respond to any displacement that does occur.

In closing, I want to repeat something that I said last Friday: to continue the progress we have made in crime reduction and neighborhood safety, it is critically important that certain elements of the emergency legislation be extended beyond the October 19 expiration date. CCTV certainly falls in that category, in my opinion. Beyond continuing the crime-fighting benefits of the cameras, it is essential that we have more time to evaluate more fully the effectiveness of this approach to combating crime in our neighborhoods. Our initial analysis suggests that CCTV cameras hold great promise in this regard. Now is not the time to stop or interrupt the progress we have made.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. My staff and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.